



## ICELAND by Margrét Hardardóttir

Hardardóttir, M. (2012). Iceland. In C. L. Glenn & J. De Groof (Eds.), *Balancing freedom, autonomy and accountability in education: Volume 3* (217-228). Tilburg, NL: Wolf Legal Publishers.

### Overview

A fundamental principle of the Icelandic education system is that everyone shall have equal access to education irrespective of sex, economic status, geographic location, religion, and cultural or social background. This principle is stated in the Constitution of the Icelandic Republic as well as in the various laws pertaining to the different educational levels. The educational system is divided into four levels: Pre-primary, compulsory (single structure primary and lower secondary education), upper secondary and higher education.

The pre-primary school level is intended for children up to the age at which compulsory school begins. Education is compulsory for children from six to sixteen years of age. The upper secondary level normally includes the sixteen- to twenty-year age group. Anyone who has completed compulsory education, has had equivalent basic education or has turned sixteen is entitled to enrol in upper secondary education. Those that have the right to enrol in upper secondary school studies have a right to study in upper secondary schools until the age of 18 as a minimum.

One of the aims of educational policy in Iceland in recent decades has been to raise the general level of education. According to the laws that govern different educational

levels, handicapped pupils, at pre-primary, compulsory and upper secondary school levels, are entitled to the same education as other pupils. The main policy is integration rather than segregation. Schools are expected to provide handicapped pupils with appropriate opportunities.

The legislation of 2008 on pre-primary, compulsory and upper secondary schools is being implemented. The main emphasis of the reviewed policy on the basis of the Lifelong Learning Strategy is to make all levels of education comprehensive so that the paths of pupils through the system are as transparent and direct as possible, with the emphasis always on flexibility.

In August 2011, the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, published revised general sections of the National Curriculum Guides (NCG) for pre- primary, compulsory and upper secondary schools, which will partly come into effect in the school year 2011/2012. The revised NCG are based on the school legislations of 2008.

The revision of the curricula for the three school levels is based on national development of the eight key competences recommended by the European Union. The National Qualification Framework is under development and encompasses all education offered in the country, be it academic studies, VET, arts studies, special education or adult education.

## *The structure of schooling*

The Icelandic Parliament is legally and politically responsible for the school system. The Parliament determines the basic objectives and administrative framework of the educational system. All education comes under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture. Education in Iceland has traditionally been organized within the public sector, and there are relatively few private institutions in the school system. Almost all private schools receive public funding.

The municipalities are responsible for the operation of pre-primary and compulsory education. Upper secondary schools and higher education institutions are run by the State. The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture monitors the implementation of the all educational laws and regulations.

The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture issues National Curriculum Guides for pre-primary, compulsory and upper secondary education. The National Curriculum Guides stipulate the schools' pedagogical role, objectives and organisation of school activities and general policy in teaching and instructional organisation. The professional operation of pre-primary and compulsory schools is to be supervised by relevant municipality and the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture. The upper secondary schools are supervised by the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture.

The construction and the running of pre-primary schools (including all salaries and

operation cost) are by law at the expense and the responsibility of municipalities. Funds are allocated to the municipalities from the national income taxation to fund among other things the construction and operation of pre-primary schools. Parents contribute a substantial amount towards operating costs at the pre- primary level. The share that parents contribute varies from one municipality to another and in some cases depends on the circumstances of the parents.

The cost of education at the compulsory level (primary and lower-secondary) is entirely borne by local municipalities, except for educational materials and the nationally coordinated examinations. All decisions regarding the construction and maintenance of school buildings and facilities are made by the local municipalities in question.

Costs for new construction and initial capital investment for equipment at the upper secondary level are met in such a way that the state pays 60% and the local municipalities, one or more, that are formally parties to the construction of the school, pay 40%. All other costs at the upper secondary level are allocated in the State budget. Agreements between the Minister of Education, Science and Culture and individual upper secondary schools, made for a period of 3-5 years at a time, specify main emphases in school activities, school curricula, study offer, organisation of instruction, quality control and evaluation, as well as other matters which the parties to the agreement consider feasible. The implementation of these agreements are to be reviewed annually and valid agreements revised if the parties to the agreements consider that necessary.

## *The legal framework*

Laws governing the three first levels of the educational system in Iceland are: The Pre-Primary School Act from 2008, the Compulsory School Act from 2008, the Upper Secondary School Act from 2008. The National Curriculum Guides provides the details of how the laws are to be implemented and define more clearly the educational role of schools and the main objectives of instruction in individual subjects in accordance with that role. More detailed provisions regarding the implementation of the laws are to be found in numerous regulations at each school level, which the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture issues on the basis of law that is in effect.

The pre-primary school level is governed by the Pre-primary School Act from 2008. The Act defines pre-primary schools as the first level of the educational system and according to the Act, pre-primary schools are to provide education and care for children below the age at which compulsory education begins. Children's interests and welfare is the primary mission of all pre-primary school activities and learning through play shall be encouraged in a creative environment.

According to the Pre-primary School Act, the local municipalities are responsible for the operation of pre-primary schools. They are to establish and operate good pre-

primary schools for children and manage the schools in accordance with the law. Furthermore their obligation is to organise specialist services for pre- primary schools. They take care of monitoring pre-primary school operations and encourage cooperation between pre-primary schools as well as between other school levels.

A Compulsory School Act was passed in June 2008. The Act introduces a set of changes that are mostly a continuation of previous legislative developments. The administration of the schools that are run by the municipalities is clarified and decentralised, and the role, rights and duties of parents and children outlined. A great emphasis is placed on the general welfare of pupils and the inclusion of all children in the school irrespective of origin or handicap. More weight is put on quality assurance and that the schools and municipalities assert their accountability towards pupils, parents and society, develop internal quality processes and provide information about their activities and results. Nationally coordinated examinations are set in grades 4, 7 and 10, with the focus on their role as a guide for pupils, parents, and schools.

Education at the upper secondary level is governed by the Upper Secondary School Act from 2008. The Upper Secondary School Act primarily defines the framework for education at that level, its objectives, the role and responsibility of the State and local municipalities as well as other parties that are involved in providing education at this level.

### *Freedom to establish non-state schools*

The same law and regulations apply to privately run schools as to schools operated by the municipalities and the State.

Local municipalities have the power to allow parents or any private parties to operate a pre-primary school. All the private pre-primary schools get financial support from their local municipality, and therefore the private sector of the pre-primary level could be described as grant-aided private sector. In 2010 approximately 13% of all children in pre-primary schools attended privately run schools. It varies in which form private pre-primary schools are operated.

The Minister of Education, Science and Culture may provide accreditation to compulsory schools or parts thereof which are run by other parties than the municipalities, such as non-profit organisations or other recognised legal forms, given the consent of the municipality regarding the establishment of the school. The consent of the municipality may be subject to a certain maximum number of pupils. The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture may also authorise accreditation of compulsory schools or study programmes within general compulsory schools which are operated according to recognised foreign or international curriculum guide and study organisations. All private schools receive considerable financial assistance from the municipalities and in addition their pupils pay school fees. Teaching in private

schools follows the National Curriculum Guide which is in effect for compulsory schools and pupils take the same nationally coordinated examinations in the grades 4, 7 and 10. In 2010 approximately 2% of children at compulsory school age attended privately run schools.

The Minister of Education, Science and Culture can provide schools, other than public upper secondary schools, with accreditation to carry out instruction at upper secondary level subject to certain conditions. Accreditation of an upper secondary school provides confirmation that at the time in which accreditation was granted, the activities of the school complied with general conditions of the Upper Secondary School Act and other law and regulations issued under the Act.

### *Homeschooling*

Home schooling is allowed at the compulsory school level. Parents who wish to teach their children at home, in part or totally, must apply for such exemption from their municipality. A head teacher may provide an exemption in consultation with the School Board and specialist services. Children that receive instruction at home are exempt from compulsory schooling but must comply with regular evaluation and monitoring and undergo the nationally coordinated examinations according to the Compulsory School Act. If the parents' are granted permission to teach their children at home, the municipality has to make a contract with a compulsory school in the municipality concerning advice, supervision and various services.

### *School choice not limited by family income*

Compulsory school education in Iceland is free of charge for the pupil. Compulsory education shall generally be of ten years in duration. All children, in general between the ages of 6 and 16, are required to attend compulsory school. Parents who choose to send their child to a privately run school must pay tuition fees.

### *School distinctiveness protected by law and policy*

There are no differences in the provision of private education or in the legislative framework compared to the public sector. Privately run schools must also work according to regulations and the National Curriculum Guides.

Non-public schools accredited by a municipality or the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, are free to work according to some philosophy as long as they meet certain standards. There are for example parent-operated pre-primary schools where a special association is formed to carry out the operation of the school, and there are organizations that manage and directing pre-primary schools that work in

accordance with a particular ideology such as Montessori, Waldorf, and health or environmental oriented.

The Hjalli School Model uses sex-segregated strands for boys and girls in the pre- primary and compulsory school. Children are divided into separate divisions on the basis of their gender most of the time but brought together in mixed groups at certain times during the day so that segregation and integration on the basis of the child's sex is used in a revolving fashion to obtain the best possible results for each individual. According to the Hjalli School Model, boys and girls need different types of exercise and different reactions. The Hjalli School Model stresses clear rules of behaviour, care for other human beings and the environment. These schools are without traditional toys and the aim is to stimulate the children's own creative and imaginative powers.

There is one international school at the compulsory school level in Iceland. The school offers a dynamic learning environment for elementary school children in grades K-7 (aged 5-13). The emphasis is on international-mindedness and positive discipline in a bilingual environment. The school is located within a public compulsory school.

### *Decisions about admitting pupils*

At the pre-primary level, parents can often choose between pre-primary schools within their own municipality, if there is more than one pre-primary school to choose from. Pre-primary schools are for all children who have not reached the age at which compulsory school begins, i.e. usually the year in which the child turns 6. However, few pre-primary schools accept children less than a year old, and usually the youngest children are at the age of 2. In municipalities where there are waiting lists for places at pre-schools children of single parents and students are often given a priority. All handicapped children have the same right as other children to attend pre-primary schools, and in many cases are given a priority status in regard to admission. The programme for the handicapped children is the same as for other children, but adapted to their ability.

The Compulsory School Act of 2008 stipulates that all children and adolescents between the ages of six and sixteen are required to attend school, and consequently there are no admission requirements for Icelandic compulsory schools. It is the duty of the local municipalities to see to it that all children from the age of six to sixteen have the opportunity to attend school. Under the law, compulsory education begins in the calendar year that the child turns six and ends at the close of the spring term the year in which the child reaches the age of 16. Parents can apply for their child to begin schooling earlier or later than its peers or they may be asked to give their consent that the child begins its schooling earlier or later than its peers. According to the Compulsory School Act, head teachers of compulsory schools have the authority to grant such exemptions after having referred the case to the local education office and received their assessment.



A child attends the school closest to its home. In local municipalities where there is more than one compulsory school, parents may request that their children be allowed to attend a school that is not in the school district where they live. Pupils, who are thought not able to attain the goals of the compulsory schooling due to learning disabilities are provided education in accordance with their abilities. Deaf, blind and otherwise disabled pupils are generally accommodated within a compulsory school or in special divisions within a school. Here more information on education for children with learning disabilities can be found. There are schools all over the country for children of compulsory school age. It varies in different areas how long the children remain at school on a daily basis. It is customary for children living in rural areas to be bussed to and from school every day, free of charge.

All pupils who have completed compulsory education have equivalent education or have reached the age of 16 have the legal right to upper secondary education, regardless of their results in the 10th and last grade of compulsory school. Those that have the right to enroll in upper secondary school, also have the right to study until the age of 18.

Each upper secondary school is responsible for admission of pupils. The obligations of each upper secondary school regarding pupil enrolment and the requirements for admission made by the school are prescribed in an agreement between the upper secondary school and the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture. The upper secondary school may place specific demands for enrolment in individual branches of study in the upper secondary school regarding preparation and study results.

Pupils may appeal to the Minister of Education against decisions made by the school as regards admission to a school and possible exclusion from a school.

## *Decisions about staff*

In recruitment of head teachers and school personnel at pre-primary and compulsory level, provisions of the Local Government Act apply as well as further provisions of the local government board agreement as applicable. To be recruited as pre-primary school head teacher, an applicant shall hold the title of pre-primary school teacher and have acquired additional education in management or have experience as teacher at the pre-school level. To be recruited as Pre-primary school teacher, an applicant shall have acquired the right to use the title of Pre-primary school teacher

The requirements for recruitment of head teacher or compulsory school teachers are stipulated in the Act on Education and Recruitment of Teachers and Head Teachers in Pre-School, Compulsory School and Upper Secondary School. Individuals who have been convicted for violating provisions of the Criminal Act may not be hired for this purpose. Upon recruitment, the person's criminal record is available or the head teacher is authorised to obtain information from the official charge sheet.

To be recruited as a compulsory school teacher, an applicant shall have acquired the right to use the title of compulsory school teacher. To be recruited as compulsory school head teacher or compulsory school assistant head teacher, an applicant shall hold the title of compulsory school teacher and have acquired additional education in management or have experience as teacher at compulsory school level. Schools which teach according to the Waldorf policy can hire teachers specially educated in the field, but they must also have education according to the provision of the above mentioned Act.

To be recruited as an upper secondary school teacher, an applicant shall have acquired the right to use the title of upper secondary school teacher. The aim is that upper secondary school teachers carry out teaching in subjects or within study fields covered by their education. When recruiting people for head positions in upper secondary school, the applicant shall hold the title of upper secondary school teacher and have acquired additional education in management or have experience as teacher at upper secondary school level.

### *Accountability for school quality*

The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture is responsible for the evaluation and monitoring of educational institutions, both public and private, and of the entire educational system in Iceland.

External evaluations are organised by the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture and include evaluation of schools/institutions as a whole, internal evaluation methods or other defined parts of school activities. At pre-primary and compulsory school levels, the municipalities can conduct their own external evaluation of schools and school activities.

The objectives of evaluation and quality control in pre-primary, compulsory and upper secondary schools are:

- a. To provide information about school activities, school achievements and development to educational authorities, school personnel, receiving schools, parents and pupils.
- b. To ensure that school activities are according to law, regulations and the national curriculum guides for pre-primary, compulsory and upper secondary schools.
- c. To increase the quality of education and school activities and encourage developmental work.



- d. To ensure that pupils' rights are respected and that they get the service they are entitled to according to law.

Schools and specific aspects of school activities at all educational levels may be subject to an external evaluation organised by the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture. External evaluations are conducted by independent evaluators whom the Ministry hires for each task. The purpose of evaluating schools externally is to obtain an overall picture of each school's activities or of specific aspects there at any given time. Attention is directed towards various features of the school's internal activities, such as administration, teaching, development work, co-operation and communications within the school study achievements and the connection between the school and society. Internal evaluation methods at all school levels may be subject to external evaluation.

Legislations on pre-primary, compulsory and upper secondary education place strong emphasis on regular internal evaluation by schools/institutions. Each school is to systematically evaluate the achievements and quality of school activities with active participation from school personnel, pupils and parents as relevant.

Every school is expected to implement methods to evaluate its work, including its teaching and administrative methods, internal communications, and contacts with parties outside the school. Schools are free to choose among systems that each develops for its own use or more common quality-management procedures, but should in any case include significant elements of internal monitoring. Internal evaluation is a way of working systematically on quality and improvements in school operations. Internal evaluation is also a way of disseminating knowledge and information on school operations. An internal evaluation is to include the school's policy and objectives, a definition of the ways in which these are to be achieved, an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the school's operations and a plan for improvements. Its main objective is to make it easier for school personnel to work towards the school's objectives, assess whether they have been achieved, review them and encourage improvements. This applies to objectives and emphases provided for in legislations, regulations and the national curriculum guides, as well as to local objectives which the school includes in its school curriculum guide.

## *Teaching of values*

The new National Curriculum Guides manifest a new educational policy whose principal objective is systematically to nurture knowledge, skills and attitudes which enhance the strengths of the individual in the future, to be a critical, active and competent participant in an egalitarian and democratic society. The core of the education policy comprises six Fundamentals: literacy, sustainability, democracy, equality, health and welfare, and creativity.

The Curriculum Guides will take effect at the beginning of the 2012-2013 academic year, and will be implemented over the next three years.

In the preparation of the new Curriculum Guides, the Minister of Education, Science and Culture made a decision that special attention should be paid to the role of the school system in the development and reconstruction of society which is now taking place. She thus established certain focusses in the process of preparing the Curriculum Guides, whereby individual and social values in public education at the three school levels are defined as Fundamentals of education. This applies to both public and private schools.

The Fundamentals are embodied in the Curriculum Guides at every school level:

- Choice of subjects and content of teaching, play and study are to be informed by the Fundamentals.
- Work procedures and methods learned by children and youngsters are influenced by ideas which emerge in discussion of the Fundamentals.
- Working methods of teachers and other school staff should be defined by the Fundamentals, in such a way as to promote autonomy, initiative and development in the work of the school.
- When the work of the school is evaluated, an assessment must be made of whether, and how, the Fundamentals have made their mark on teaching, play and study, and on the work of the school as a whole.

The Fundamentals are:

- Literacy: the principal objective of literacy is that pupils be active participants in recreating and rewriting the world, by creating their own meanings and responding in a personal, creative manner to what they read, via the media and technology available to them. As in the past, it is of great importance that children should master certain reading and writing skills; but attention is now also paid to all technologies which pupils can use in communication, study and signification – in their own interests and those of society.
- Sustainability: Sustainability is concerned with taking account of the interaction of environment, the economy, society and welfare. Definitions of *sustainability* and *sustainable development* generally entail the idea that the environment should be passed on to future generations in no worse a condition than we have received it; and that we should seek to meet the needs of the present day without impairing the possibilities of future generations to meet their needs in their turn. The economy of each society plays a vital role with respect to rational use of resources, and a fair division of them. Thus, it is important that economic growth should neither be based on, nor lead to, excessive encroachment on nature. Production and consumption are constants in society, and within the economic

life of the individual. An understanding of our own environmental footprint, and that of communities and societies, is conducive to sustainable development and moderation.

- **Democracy:** In a democracy, individuals take a stance on moral issues, and are active participants in the shaping of society. In a democratic society, citizens must enjoy human rights, and share decision-making in all major fields of their lives. Democracy is premised on the citizens' shared responsibility and consciousness and activity, which makes them capable of shaping their society, and having an influence at a local and national level. Democracy is important within the school. In the first place, schools must take account of the fact that children and youngsters will become participants in a democratic society, and hence it is vital for them to learn about such societies. Secondly, schools must ensure that respect for the human values of every individual is upheld in all its work. The principle is that children and youngsters learn to practise democracy, by learning about democracy, within a democracy.
- **Equality:** Education on equality entails a critical examination of received ideas in society and its institutions, with the aim of teaching children and youngsters to identify the factors which lead to discrimination against some groups, and privilege for others. Equality is used as an umbrella term, covering a number of factors; a selection of these follow, in alphabetical order: Age, class, colour, culture, disability, gender, kinship, language, nationality, philosophy, religion, residence, sexuality. At all school levels, education on equality should take place, with discussion of how the above-mentioned factors can lead to discrimination or privilege in people's lives. Emphasis must be placed upon boys and girls being offered the most equal and widest possibilities. Nowhere within the school system, neither in content nor in procedures, should there be any impediments in the way of either sex.
- **Health and Welfare:** Health is grounded in mental, physical and social wellbeing, regardless of social status. It is a product of a complex interplay of the individual, his/her circumstances, and the environment. All the work of the school must nurture health, and systematically promote welfare and wellbeing, as children and youngsters spend much of their day in school. Education must be provided on physical exercise, motor skills must be enhanced, and a safe environment must be provided which encourages everyone to be physically active. Account must be taken of this in physical education teaching and all other school activity. By the same token, within the school environment healthy eating must be promoted, through education along with availability of a varied range of foods. The principal aspects of health on which emphasis must be placed are a positive self-image, exercise, nutrition, rest, mental wellbeing, good communication, safety, hygiene, sexual health, and understanding of one's own and others' feelings.
- **Creativity:** Creativity entails the shaping and presentation of objects, the making

of something, doing something new or different from what the individual knows, or has done before. Creativity is to discover, enjoy, stimulate curiosity and interest, activate the imagination, and play with possibilities. Creativity breaks up conventional patterns, rules and systems, and provides a new vision of phenomena and of received ideas. Creativity is built upon critical thinking, and on methods which constantly open up new possibilities; and hence the creative process is no less important than the outcome. Creativity also entails the practical application of ideas. Methods in creative arts and scholarly disciplines are often characterised by creativity, initiative and originality. It is desirable to see such methods in all study and in the work of the school.

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